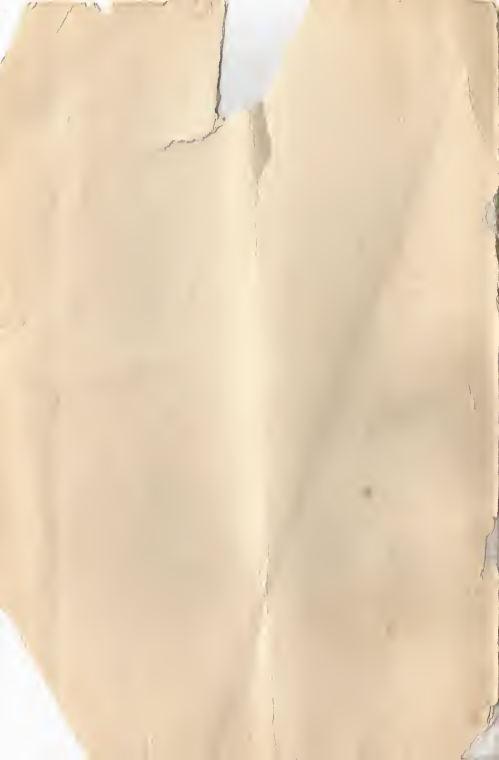


LESS
ON
DRAWING AND PAINTING
BY
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ALL PASSES. ART ALONE
ENDURING STAYS TO US:
THE BUST OUT-LASTS THE THRONE,—
THE COIN, TIBERIUS



NOTES ON DRAWING AND PAINTING

Every art has its language and unless the artist, whether professional or amateur, masters it he is at a great disadvantage. He never will fully succeed either in expressing his feeling to others or enjoy the great pleasure and satisfaction himself of the complete realization of his impressions, his emotions and his visions. My experience as a teacher of art in schools and of people in general who have the urge to draw or paint, convinces me that they often regard the graphic arts as an exception to the rule stated above. They assume that there is some way to avoid the necessary training and that they can dispense with it. For example, no one would expect a child or an adult to play the piano or the violin without long and arduous study of the technique of these instruments. It is taken for granted at the outset that this is indispensable. And although our spoken and written language is such a universal means of communication that we all have to master its technique to some extent, we understand that the novelist, the poet or professional writer in any field of literature must have special training and much practice to succeed. A possible explanation of this curious misconception is the fact that, while we do not expect a person wholly uneducated in music to produce it, the average child, given paper and pencil, often renders a crude resemblance to reality in his drawing. The drawings on the walls of the Paleolithic caves at Altamira and elsewhere in France and Northern Spain show that the prehistoric men of twenty thousand or more years ago had a strong and instinctive feeling for form and drew remarkably well, in a primitive fashion. Their drawings of animals incised on the cave walls are surprisingly true and realistic. I think more people than we suspect have a latent ability to draw quite well in a natural but unscientific manner.

To go far in any art, however, requires training and discipline, and this is as true of painting and sculpture as of the rest. The basis of the arts of representation, the rendering of visual objects in form and color, is drawing, and without facility in this but little value or importance can be achieved.

It is an interesting study to trace the development of the art of drawing down through the ages, from Paleolithic times to the present by all races. The great periods of Oriental art in China and Japan, the art of the Greeks and Romans, the Renaissance in Italy, should be studied well by the art student. But as I wish to make these notes as brief and simple as possible, I will say that for the purpose of learning to draw it may be said that the teaching of draftsmanship culminated in France in the early nineteenth century. French art was derived largely from the classic art of the Greeks and Romans and the academic training in drawing and painting in the French schools of that period, never has been and probably never will be excelled. The foundations of our own art and that of other countries are based upon it. This training was highly scientific and systematic and is an extremely valuable education in itself in developing the mental faculties. It is intellectual above all else. Its value also in cultivating the appreciation of art itself is inestimable. So I say to you who wish to practice any of the graphic arts you must first learn to draw. It is the basis of them all. And to begin with I wish to correct a popular error. It is often thought by the novice that drawing or painting is a trick of the hand, a sort of manual magic or dexterity. This is true only to a slight and relatively unimportant degree. Drawing is a cultivation and sharpening of our vision, our ability to see. As soon as the student really sees the object he wishes to represent, has a true conception of it in his mind, he finds relatively little difficulty in transferring it to paper or canvas.

You will remember that in our studies of last summer you sometimes told me that you could not draw or paint certain objects in distinction from certain others. When I asked you to draw a boat from the bow, in a foreshortened position, you said you doubted if you could do it. When I set you a still life of flowers to paint, you said you were not used to painting flowers, and when you came to paint them you asked me how you should render the surface of the brass bowl that contained them. I tried at the time to dispel this misapprehension and I hope I succeeded. But at the risk of unnecessary repetition I wish to emphasize again the fact, that, having mastered the technique of drawing and painting, you are free to represent the whole visible world. One thing is no more difficult than another. Unless you fully understand this the attitude of mind that considers one object as easier or more difficult to render than another will be a perpetual stumbling block and retard your progress. If you get the right form or proportions, in the right place, of the right strength of light or dark, or values, and, if painting, the right color, your rendering is bound to be true. It cannot escape you. It is as simple as that. You may remember that when you were painting the head from life I told you not to think about the likeness but to try to get a good drawing, correct proportions and values. If you did this the likeness would come of itself. When you fully grasp this principle it will solve most of your problems. The rest is only a matter of practice. It is the mental attitude, not manual skill. I mention these things again lest they become dim in your memory. They are most important and always should be kept clearly in mind.

The English artist, Harold Speed, in a treatise on drawing and painting has this to say on the subject of Vision. "The visual blindness of the majority of people is greatly to be

deplored as nature is ever⁴ offering them on their retina, even in the meanest slum, a mass of color and form that is a constant source of pleasure to those who can see it. But so many are content to use this wonderful faculty of vision for utilitarian purposes only. It is the privilege of the artist to show how wonderful and beautiful is all this music of color and form, so that people having been moved by it in his work, may be encouraged to see the same beauty in the things around them. This is the best argument in favor of making art a subject of general education; that it should teach people to see. Everybody does not need to draw and paint, but if everybody could get the faculty of appreciating form and color on their retina as form and color, what a wealth would always be at their disposal for enjoyment! The Japanese habit of looking at a landscape upside down between their legs is a way of seeing without the deadening influence of touch associations. Thus looking, one is surprised into seeing for once the color and form of things with the association of touch for the moment forgotten, and is puzzled at the beauty. The odd thing is that although thus we see things upside down, the pictures on our retinas are for once the right way up; for ordinarily the visual picture is inverted on the retina, like the ground glass at the back of a photographic camera. . . ."

An academic training in drawing and painting does not necessarily produce a great artist. It should not be continued too long, only long enough to enable the student to express himself fluently. What he does with his knowledge is another thing entirely. Many Frenchmen and students of other nationalities in the Parisian schools painted from the life model for ten years or more or until they could render it with absolute perfection and the greatest ease. Technique could go no farther. Many of these men never did anything else. Their subsequent

work was only a continuation of their school work, extremely clever and facile, but wholly uninspired and distinguished. The average student, given any natural aptitude whatever, under good instruction, should master drawing sufficiently in a year or two at most, sometimes in a few months, for a working knowledge, to be combined with painting for the second half of the time. But no very interesting or valuable result is attained without a full measure of this discipline. Better a little more than is necessary than not quite enough. It will save much time and wasted labor to recognize and acknowledge the necessity for a thorough training in drawing as early as possible and to apply oneself patiently to the mastery of form, in its two or flat dimensions and the full volume of the three dimensions of modeling. My experience of teaching has been that men usually learn to draw more easily than women, while women often have a better sense of color and perhaps a more artistic temperament and greater appreciation. When the ability to draw well is combined with a fine sense of color we have the ideal condition.

Lest I seem to over-emphasize the importance of a thorough knowledge of drawing I will quote the following letter from Whistler to his friend the French painter, Fantin La Tour in the sixties. It was published later in the "*Gazette des Beaux Arts*". It is one of the most illuminating discourses on this subject that I know. It should be posted on the walls of every art school. "I have too many things to tell you to write them all this morning, for I am in an impossible press of work. It is the pain of giving birth. You know what that is. I have several pictures in my head and they issue with difficulty. For I must tell you that I am grown exacting and "*difficile*"—very different from what I was when I threw everything pell-mell on canvas, knowing that instinct and fine color would carry me

through. Ah! my dear Fantin, what an education I have given myself! or, rather, what a fearful want of education I am conscious of! With the fine gifts I naturally possess, what a painter I should now be, if, vain and satisfied with those powers, I hadn't disregarded everything else! You see, I came at an unfortunate moment. Courbet and his influence were odious. The regret, the rage, even the hatred I feel for all that now would perhaps astonish you, but here is the explanation. It isn't poor Courbet that I loathe, nor even his works. I recognize, as I always did, their qualities. Nor do I lament the influence of his painting on mine. There isn't any; none will be found in my canvases. That can't be otherwise, for I am too individual and have always been rich in qualities which he hadn't and which were enough for me. But this is why all that was so bad for me. That damned realism made such a direct appeal to my vanity as a painter, and, flouting all traditions, shouted with the assurance of ignorance, "Vive la Nature!" "Nature," my boy—that was a piece of bad luck for me. My friend, our little society was a refractory as you like. Oh! why wasn't I a pupil of Ingres! I don't say that in rapture before his pictures. I don't care much for them. I think a lot of his paintings that we saw together very questionable in style, not in the least Greek, as people pretend, but very viciously French. I feel there is much more to discover, there are much finer things to do. But I repeat it, why wasn't I his pupil? What a master he would have been. How safely he would have led us. Drawing, by Jove! Color—color is vice. Certainly it can be and has the right to be one of the finest virtues. Grasped with a strong hand, controlled by her master, Drawing, Color is a splendid bride with a husband worthy of her—her lover but her master, too—the most magnificent mistress in the world, and the result is to be seen in all the lovely things produced from this union. But

coupled with indecision, with a weak, timid, vicious drawing, easily satisfied, color becomes a jade making game of her mate, you know, and abusing him just as she pleases, taking the thing lightly so long as she has a good time, treating her unfortunate companion like a duffer who bores her—which is just what he does. And look at the result; a chaos of intoxication, of trickery, regret, unfinished things. Well, enough of this. It explains the immense amount of work I am now doing. I have been teaching myself thus for a year and more, and I am sure that I shall make up the wasted time. But—but—what labor and pain!"

II.

In the period to which I have referred, the first half of the nineteenth century in France, when draftsmanship in drawing and painting was so highly developed, the French artist J. A. D. Ingres, (1780-1867), was one of its most distinguished practitioners. As a master of line drawing he was one of the greatest of all time. His drawings of the figure and his portraits in lead pencil are masterpieces. He had a powerful influence upon the teaching of drawing and painting in his time and his tradition was held in reverence in the schools of Paris long after his death. It had much to do with the instruction given by the men who followed him, such artists as Gerome, Laurens, Lefebvre, Carolus Duran, and others who taught in the academies or had private schools of their own, and who passed on his principles. Henry Adams said that a parent gives life and, as parent, gives no more. A murderer takes life and his deed stops there. A teacher affects eternity—he never can tell where his influence will stop. A principle that is based upon fundamental truth is a pervasive and indestructible thing. It never is outworn or outdated.

My insistence upon the importance of good drawing may seem overstressed. But I had the good fortune in my youth to come under the direct influence of French academic training. I studied at the Art Students' League of New York in the eighties, in the antique class under George de Forest Brush who was a pupil of Gerome and in the life class under Kenyon Cox who was a pupil of Gerome and Carolus Duran. Both artists were consummate draftsmen and their criticisms were severe. They held us to the highest standards. In addition, my teacher in painting was Dwight W. Tyron who had studied in Paris for five years in the highly specialized and very select school of Jacquesson de la Chevreuse who was a favorite pupil of Ingres. So I imbibed a triple extract, so to speak, of the best French tradition. It was a potent and ineradicable distillation that has served me well, both in the practice of painting and in teaching. I cannot overestimate its value and importance. To bring these rambling remarks upon the subject of drawing to a close I will repeat in condensed form the method of approach which I gave you last summer, to refresh your memory. It is, in substance, the method of the old French academic teaching, which I fear is sadly lacking in most of our art schools today, judging from what I have seen of their product.

In drawing from the antique, the grasping of the large proportions of the cast in its simplest aspect, observing carefully the action and construction, and insistence that the drawing shall be the exact size of the cast, verified by careful measurements of the model itself. Next, the laying in of the large masses of shadow in one simple flat tone, as soon as the general proportions are approximated, since the spotting of the masses in light and dark, at once helps the eye to see the true proportions and to make corrections. Then by

a rapid but careful revision of proportions and masses together and the indication of the principal values, or difference in the strength of lights and darks, the whole drawing is worked upon and the relation of its parts established. At the last such elaboration of details to be added as will not disturb the unity of the whole. The big things first, the little things last.

To the student who is as yet unconscious of the supreme importance of drawing, who is impatient to paint, the severe discipline of mastering form seems irksome, a kind of painful drudgery, to be endured under protest and got over with or by-passed as soon as possible. This attitude is unfortunate for it not only delays the ultimate achievement but deprives the student of what should be the enjoyment of one of the most interesting and fascinating fields of art, drawing for its own sake. The competent draftsman is made free of the domain of etching, dry point, engraving, lithography, illustrating and the arts of design, in fact the whole realm of work in black and white. He may, indeed, become a master in this field alone and establish a great reputation like that of Muirhead Bone, the Scotch etcher, or, in the past, of Daumier. The ink painting of the Chinese shows the possibilities of beautiful drawing, pure and simple.

I urge you, therefore, to study and practice drawing, not only until you can draw well, but until you enjoy it for its own sake, for it has many and delightful possibilities entirely apart from the use of color. Keep a sketch book and pencil at hand, indoors and out, and practice line drawings, of figure and landscape, at every opportunity. You will become fluent and develop a sort of artistic shorthand that is invaluable in making quick notations, reducing a subject to its elements, and above all, in the study of composition. And,

along with it, study the masters of drawing and design, Leonardo, Raphael, Mantegna, Botticelli, Rubens, Rembrandt, Holbein, Durer, Ingres; and study also the work of the great etchers of these and later times, Whistler, Seymour Haden, Muirhead Bone and many others, not to mention the Oriental masters of black and white, especially of design, or their word for it,—Notan. So much for drawing.

III.

I have not as much to say to you on the subject of color, though there is plenty to be said about that, too. Drawing is scientific, color is poetic and emotional, though it has its science. But it is extremely personal and no two people see or feel color alike. While almost anyone can learn to draw, the sense of color is a natural gift, like the feeling for music or poetry. It goes with the imaginative temperament and though it may be developed to some extent in those who do not possess it, the true colorist is born not made. As I have seen from your work that you have a natural and strong sense of color I think it is unnecessary to go into the subject in detail at present, except to call your attention to the balance of color in Nature, that it is divided into warm, cool and natural color, according to the local colors of an object upon which the light falls, warm in the lights, cool in the shadows or vice versa. The most difficult thing for the student in painting is to learn to see the color in the shadows. Bearing these few principles in mind, I think you can be trusted to criticize your own work as far as its color is concerned. But the subject of color in the abstract sense, as a most important element in creative work, leads me at once to the far more involved and inexhaustible subject of taste, so vital and indispensable in all art. I cannot emphasize too strongly

that in your technical study of drawing and painting you also study constantly aesthetics in the larger aspect, the cultivation of your general knowledge and appreciation. Never before were these so much needed or so much neglected.

Last summer I gave you a copy of the *Synopsis of History of architecture, painting, sculpture and the derivative arts*, published by the Freer Gallery in Washington and by the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. This is useful in giving you a bird's eye view or general survey of the history and development of art from its beginning, and also in directing your attention to the art of the past when you visit museums. Spend a part of your time on the Egyptians and the Orientals instead of concentrating too exclusively on the moderns. There are many good books on the subject of art in general and upon its technique. I will mention only a few, those that I think will help you most and not to confuse you. First of all Whistler's "Ten O'Clock". There is more concentrated wisdom in this short essay than in any other work I can think of. It goes to the very roots of the subject and should be read frequently by artists and by students.

William Morris Hunt's "Talks on Art", a series of notes compiled by his pupil, Miss Helen M. Knowlton, from his criticisms to his pupils, is extremely suggestive and inspiring in your study and practice of painting. I think we lent you these two books last summer but they will bear re-reading many times. They are classics.

The following are all excellent treatises on art and will add much to your theoretic and general knowledge, to your culture and to your enjoyment, if not to your technical accomplishment.

These will occupy you for a time if you digest them. We have all of these books, with five or six hundred more on the subject of art, all of which are always at your disposal.

"Considerations on Painting"

"The Higher Life in Art"

(Five lectures on the Barbizon School)

By John La Farge

"The History of American Painting"

By Samuel Isham and Royal Cortissoz

"American Artists," Cortissoz

"Art and Common Sense," Cortissoz

"Talks on Art," By William Morris Hunt

Compiled by Helen M. Knowlton

Whistler's "Ten O'Clock."

My remembrance of our lessons together of last summer has been most happy and I hope your interest will continue and that you may have opportunity again to go on with your work. I should like to think that, however far you may go, the suggestions I have made may prove helpful in that pleasant pursuit, the quest for beauty.

Beauty has many definitions. For one, I like that of Somerset Maugham, the English novelist. He says:

"Why should you think Beauty which is the most precious thing in the world, lies like a stone on the beach for the careless passerby to pick up idly? Beauty is something wonderful and strange that the artist fashions out of the chaos of the world in the torment of his soul.

And when he has made it, it is not given to all to know it. To recognize it you must repeat the adventure of the artist. It is a melody that he sings to you and to hear it again in your own heart you want knowledge and sensitiveness and imagination."



